



Vision Australia Submission

Inquiry into the Multi Purpose Taxi Program

To: Economy and Infrastructure Committee Inquiry into the Multi Purpose Taxi Program, mptpinquiry@parliament.vic.gov.au

Date: 30 July 2021

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Victorian Parliament Economy and Infrastructure Committee Inquiry into the Multi-Purpose Taxi Program

Vision Australia is pleased to provide this short submission to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee inquiry into the Multi-Purpose Taxi Program (MPTP). Our response highlights the valuable role the program plays in the lives of Victorians' who are blind or have low vision and how having access to the program empowers members of our community with choice and independence. Having the ability to move safely and easily around the community increases opportunities for people who are blind or have low vision to gain and maintain employment, access health care and education as well as to engage in many other daily activities.

To inform our submission, Vision Australia sought feedback from a small sample of clients on their experience with the program. The sample was made up of 26 clients, all completing a short survey via the Survey Monkey platform. Anecdotes from clients have been included in our submission to provide real world examples of how the current program supports people who are blind or have low vision as well as insights as to what changes could be made to improve the program in the future.

Importance of the MPTP

Transport plays an essential role in our ability to participate actively in modern day Australian life. People who are blind or have low vision use taxi and ride share transport options for exactly the same reasons that the rest of the community use private cars: commuting to work, going shopping, taking their children to school, attending sporting, educational or cultural events, attending medical appointments, visiting friends and family, and participating in community activities. Thus, for our clients, utilising taxi and rideshare services is not an optional convenience or luxury, but an essential part of life. Safe and equitable access to taxis and, more recently, other forms of point to point transport has a significant impact on physical and mental well-being.

Despite Victoria having a comprehensive integrated public transport system, there are times when public transport is not the right option or even an option at all for our clients. This is due to a variety of reasons such as having little to no functioning sight, or poor mobility, leading to lower levels of confidence to safely and independently access public transport. We also have many clients who live a fair distance away from their workplace, or live in regional parts of the state, rendering travel on public transport not a viable option as services are often limited.

Taxi and rideshare services, represent the closest equivalent to car travel for people who are blind or have low vision, and the MPTP plays a critical role in ensuring people who are blind or have low vision are able to utilise taxi and rideshare services.

Our clients highlighted the importance the MPTP plays in their lives and the maintenance of their independence:

“I am completely blind I cannot drive, it is difficult to independently catch public transport and public transport around me does not always go to the places I need to go.”

“The MPTP is a very important part of my lifestyle and affords me the opportunity to interact in the community and to be a functioning family member and parent. Although I am retired now and I could not have possibly continued to work as a primary school teacher without the MPTP program as there was no public transport to the school I worked at for 23 years...”

“Without it I would not be anywhere near as independent”

“...would not be able to get around without it. It is hard to express just how important it (the MPTP) has been.”

“MPTP is critical in enabling me to live out my life. It would be far more complex and I wouldn't be able to do the things I do if I didn't have it.”

As these above comments highlight, there are many reasons why having a choice as to how you move around the community is central in a person maintaining their independence. Further, people who are blind or have low vision have individual needs and responsibilities, so having the flexibility of choosing ride share and taxi services allows our clients to access the same types of choices as sighted members of the community, and maintain their independence safely.

Getting out to meet a friend when the weather is bad or travelling a far distance to receive a service are important elements in the lives of people who are blind or have low vision and the MPTP scheme plays a critical role in helping keep our clients connected, working towards preventing feelings of social isolation, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Of clients surveyed 95% reported that being a part or not being part of the scheme influences how often they would use taxi or ride share service:

“It is not affordable for me to constantly catch taxis at full price. I do receive a travel allowance from the NDIS but because I now work full time this only just covers being able to get to work nothing extra.”

“Having to pay full price would limit the number of places I could go without needing O&M training in advance. I would need to use public transport and learn each new destination I wanted to travel to. Taxi's allow me to get directly to the location without a lot of lead time.”

Undeniably, for most people, it is simply too costly to travel using taxi or ride share services for daily living activities such as getting to work, accessing support services and participating in community activities; and the level of government support to individuals such as an NDIS mobility allowance, is not enough to cover these costs. This is a prime example of how valuable the cost saving component of the MPTP is

for our clients. Without this many of our clients would be significantly impacted particularly in areas such as employment and social inclusion.

One client noted:

“I probably would not use taxis or rideshare if I did not get this subsidy because it would be prohibitively expensive”

This was shared by another client:

“It allows me to travel far more regularly and independently due to the reduced cost. If I need to pay full price I would have to rely on others or refrain from going out”.

Eligibility

Vision Australia would like to acknowledge the importance that people who are legally blind are exempt from the MPTP subsidy cap. As has been highlighted throughout this submission, utilising taxi and rideshare services is often the most suitable transport option for our community. The uncapped level of support provided by the MPTP to people who are blind or have low vision, is critical to them maintaining their independence and having the ability to live the life they choose. However, we do however recognize that there is often a gap between when someone loses their driving license due to vision loss and when they are fully eligible for the MPTP scheme.

Taxi and Ride Share

Vision Australia has been advocating over the past 5 years for a “provider neutral” approach to be adopted by the MPTP and similar schemes interstate. We welcomed these extremely positive changes to the MPTP scheme to now include ride share services, and we acknowledge this is set to be increased through the Data Collection Provider (DPC) expansion project. This positive change allows people who are blind or have low vision to have the same point to point transport options as the rest of the community. However, through both the survey and anecdotal feedback we have received, there appears to be a greater need for increasing community awareness of the addition of ride share to the scheme. As one client expressed.

“I was not aware that I could use my taxi card with rideshare”

As such, Vision Australia recommends the MPTP increase stakeholder engagement and further assist to circulate any new information to MPTP members, setting a standard to communicate any future changes, particularly if there is to be expansion.

Similarly, there needs to be safeguards in place to ensure customers will receive the same level of service using ride share options as they do with taxi services, as unfortunately this isn’t always the case. One client commented:

“The few times I've used rideshare, it hasn't been a very good experience...”

Further, 86% of clients we surveyed indicated they preferred utilising taxi services. This largely appears to be due to fears around safety and regulation, and concerns around efficiency and cost of ride share. It could also be because there is limited ride share options under the scheme at this point.

The below comments highlight some of our respondent's thoughts:

“I find taxis more efficient and cheaper”

“I feel safer in taxis”

“The industry is better regulated and so I have more confidence that the drivers and operators will be better trained and there is more avenue for complaint if things go wrong.”

Feedback also highlighted that there is a need to review current systems taxi services use to process MPTP cards and payment. For example, one client said:

“With the taxi card, it would be better to be able to put money on it because sometimes the machines do not work, and then I find you have to pay full price.”

A National System

Looking to the future, Vision Australia remains hopeful that a nationwide approach will eventually be implemented whereby all states and territories adopt a streamlined universal system, making it easier for our clients to confidently travel interstate. Commendably, ride share services around the nation now offer the MPTP members universal access to the scheme. We strongly encourage all taxi services to do the same, as we know that currently, there are significant issues posed for people who are blind or have low vision when they travel interstate in regards to using their MPTP card in taxis:

“...when I travelled interstate frequently, as I did in most of the past two decades, for work, only about one in three taxi drivers ` the interstate MPTP taxi vouchers and knew how the system worked...”

An integrated nationwide scheme would provide our clients confidence when they travel, removing the hassle of remembering to order vouchers and taking them on their travels. Similarly, clients would have peace of mind that they will receive the fare subsidy no matter where they are across the country further eliminating any room for question around the rules of the scheme.

Payment System & Practice

Vision Australia would like to see taxi services adopt a similar approach currently being used by ride share services linking passengers MPTP card number to their account which can be accessed via a smartphone or tablet. At the end of each trip, payment is directly debited from a passenger's account of choice. This method would eliminate drivers needing to have multiple machines, not being able to process cards due to their machines being down, and passengers not needing to find more than one card each time they travel. Importantly, this method would assist all members of the MPTP not just people who are blind or have low vision.

One client expressed their frustration:

"...when paying for the trip. Some drivers want the card at the start of the journey and others at the end. If there was a clear procedure where the holder of the card can just tap on like they would for a credit card as the current practice typically means the driver drops the card in the console which can then be lost or forgotten. The ability to use the card on all states would be greatly appreciated as the paper vouchers."

This type of frustration can be avoided if there is an electronic payment option available for all trips as well as a card option for those who don't have the required technology skills.

Discrimination

Discrimination is the result of a person or group of people being treated less favorably than other people or groups. People who are blind or have low vision are often subjected to multiple forms of indirect discrimination when going about their daily activities in the community. In essence, the MPTP provides members of the scheme greater choice to access transport and mobility solutions, however unfortunately, 50% of clients we surveyed reported experiences of discrimination when using taxi or ride share services. The below case study reflects one client's recent experience:

Case study

Jane has significant vision loss and has been a member of the MPTP scheme for over twenty years. Jane uses taxis on a regular basis and is aware of how the program works.

Jane and her ten year old daughter arrived into Southern Cross Station on a Saturday night after spending a week with Jane's family in regional Victoria. Jane and her daughter made it to the taxi rank outside the station on Spencer Street with their luggage. As Jane and her daughter approached the first taxi in line, the driver got out and asked where they wanted to go. The driver helped Jane with their luggage and put it in the boot.

Jane and her daughter got into the back of the taxi. Jane made sure her daughter was all safe and buckled in and then did the same for herself. At the same time, the driver had already started the car and began to drive in the direction of where they wanted to go. Once Jane had her seat belt fastened, she took her wallet out and her daughter helped her find her MPTP card. Jane reached in front to where the driver was seated and said

“Here is my M40 card”.

The driver immediately replied, “I can’t use this, you need to give this to me at the start of the trip”

Jane said, “It is the start of the trip”.

Driver: “No, it is too late now, you will need to pay full price”.

Jane, is very aware of her responsibilities as a member of the MPTP including when to inform a driver that she has a card and again tried to reason with the driver to accept her card.

The driver abruptly pulled the taxi over to the side of the road, got out slamming the driver side door, walked to the rear of the vehicle and removed Jane’s luggage from the boot, leaving it on the side of the road. The driver then opened the back passenger door and demanded Jane and her daughter get out of the car.

Jane asked the driver to please turn around and take them back to the taxi rank as it was dark, late and they had a lot of luggage with them. The driver continued to shout at them and demand they get out. Jane asked the driver to please provide her with his identification number, so she could file a complaint. The driver ignored Jane and continued to demand they exit the taxi.

In the end, Jane who at this point was very shaken up and concerned for her daughter had no choice but to get out of the taxi. The driver took off down the street leaving Jane and her daughter and all their luggage on the side of the road.

Fortunately, Jane’s daughter had used quick thinking and memorized the driver identification number which had been displayed on the dashboard as well as the name of the taxi company. Jane used this information to make a complaint with the relevant taxi company however, Jane did not hear back from the taxi service. In addition, Jane felt quite upset about what had happened she did not feel comfortable to take it any further.

The above case strongly highlights the vulnerability of our clients, not knowing what will transpire every time they get into a taxi or ride share. Vision Australia acknowledges the MPTP is not directly at fault or responsible for individual driver behavior, however the issue of drivers refusing to accept the MPTP card is all too common. The MPTP has a responsibility to ensure all drivers in the taxi and ride share industry know their responsibilities under the scheme and comply with accessible transport requirements to deliver a safe, reliable and discrimination free scheme to its members.

As one of our clients commented:

“I often experience indirect discrimination when catching taxis, I will order a taxi and state that I require assistance as I live on a busy road and I cannot identify the taxi, the driver then usually drives off. Usually when I’m trying to go to work I have to call at least 1–3 taxis to get a ride and then I am late...”

This client also noted that due to so many difficulties from start to finish of the process they have developed anxiety and fearful for losing their employment.

“These experiences give me severe anxiety, lower my confidence and put me at risk of losing my employment due to being constantly late...”

Refusals to carry Seeing Eye Dogs and Guide Dogs

People who use assistance dogs as their primary mobility aid do so because it offers them a level of amenity, convenience, equality and independence that is not otherwise available. Unfortunately, despite decades of legislation making it unlawful for taxis and other providers to refuse to carry Seeing Eye Dogs, discrimination in this area still represents a significant barrier for people who are blind or have low vision. We know from anecdotal feedback that almost all dog users have experienced a refusal or negative treatment in relation to their assistance animal.

Survey responses highlighted that our clients are often being refused access to both taxi and ride share services as a result of their assistance animal, for example one client said:

“When using taxis and ride shares, I have experienced frequent service denial because I am travelling with a guide dog. After an incident of discrimination in which I was verbally abused by a taxi driver...”

Another client shared:

“I have sometimes had drivers refuse to take me because I have a Guide Dog. I have also had one operator refuse to note that I have a Guide Dog in the booking notes despite me requesting that she did. I have also several times had drivers claim to have not been able to find me when I enquire with the operator, despite waiting out the front of the premise and I believe this could be related to them seeing either physically or through the booking notes that I have a Guide dog which they do not want to collect.”

Similarly, another client commented:

“I am often met with refusal to take my Seeing Eye Dog”

Vision Australia recognizes that it is not the direct responsibility of the MPTP to manage the behavior of taxi and rideshare drivers in relation to dog guides, however we would encourage the MPTP to put in place a system that will ensure taxi and rideshare services under the scheme undergo regular mandatory disability and

inclusion training. This would set a benchmark to better regulate the industry and improve the confidence of people who are blind or have low vision when they are travelling with their dog guides.

Effective complaints mechanism

Evidently, when cases of discrimination occur, a clear and reliable complaints process needs to be available, otherwise people who access the scheme are subject to exploitation, similar to what was described in our earlier case study. Survey data indicated that 60% of clients did not make a formal complaint after an occurrence of discrimination, suggesting a lack of trust in current complaint processes.

"I lodged a formal complaint to the booking service provider and to commercial passenger vehicles Victoria. Whilst they were initially apologetic and made positive noises about resolving the situation, they soon ceased contacting me and to my knowledge the driver has received no penalty or re-training. I have also received no assurance or written apology from the CPV..."

Another client commented:

"I did to begin with, but nothing seems to change with rideshare drivers, so have given up".

Similarly, this was shared by another client:

"I have sometimes lodged a complaint with the VTD when drivers have refused to take me or have treated me badly when I insist that they take me. I have reported the car number when possible and asked to be notified what would happen."

To improve reporting process, Vision Australia recommends a standardised complaints process be implemented across the industry. This would see all taxi services adopt an equivalent system currently being used by Uber. As a result, all travel would be accounted for via a personal app, documenting the time of a trip, pick up and drop off locations, and the driver identification number. Should a complaint need to be reported all relevant information is easily accessible to all parties. The below comments highlight positive examples of the ride share complaints process:

"Taxi, complaints very rarely get any resolutions in relation to assistance dog issues. They are very good at taking complaints with no follow up and to my knowledge drivers are rarely made accountable with fines or suspensions".

"Making a complaint on Uber is fantastic! Through my app on my phone I am able to find details of the ride/ driver I am wanting to make a complaint about and initiate the complaint. Shortly after lodging the complaint I am directly contacted by a person who steps through the situation and explains the next step. The app also lets me stay up to date with the complaints process. I am informed the driver is given an immediate suspension from the Uber app. The driver is also required to complete a disability training module and I understand get two chances before being removed access from the app if they continue to do the same thing."

The above feedback reflects how important it is to have transparency in these complaints and reporting process for stakeholder piece of mind and to ensure accountability is taken when discrimination occurs.

Conclusion

As has been highlighted throughout this submission, taxi and rideshare provide a critical service to people who are blind or have low vision, and the MPTP is central in ensuring they are able to access these services, and participate in everyday life. Without the MPTP, our communities' ability to live the life they choose would be significantly negatively impacted.

Vision Australia hopes the MPTP continues to evolve and adapt the scheme in line with changes to technologies and systems, so that people who are blind or have low vision can continue to utilise this vital service.

About Vision Australia

Vision Australia is the largest national provider of services to people who are blind, deafblind, or have low vision in Australia. We are formed through the merger of several of Australia's most respected and experienced blindness and low vision agencies, celebrating our 150th year of operation in 2017.

Our vision is that people who are blind, deafblind, or have low vision will increasingly be able to choose to participate fully in every facet of community life. To help realise this goal, we provide high-quality services to the community of people who are blind, have low vision, are deafblind or have a print disability, and their families.

Vision Australia service delivery areas include: registered provider of specialist supports for the NDIS and My Aged Care Aids and Equipment, Assistive/Adaptive Technology training and support, Seeing Eye Dogs, National Library Services, Early childhood and education services, and Felix Library for 0-7 year olds, employment services, production of alternate formats, Vision Australia Radio network, and a national partnership with Radio for the Print Handicapped, NSW Spectacles Program and Government Advocacy and Engagement. We also work collaboratively with Government, businesses and the community to eliminate the barriers our clients face in making life choices and including fully exercising their rights as Australian citizens.

Vision Australia has unrivalled knowledge and experience through constant interaction with clients and their families, of whom we provide services to more than 26,000 people each year, and also through the direct involvement of people who are blind or have low vision at all levels of our organisation. Vision Australia is well placed to advise governments, business and the community on challenges faced by people who are blind or have low vision as well as they support they require to fully participating in community life.

We have a vibrant Client Reference Group, comprising of people with lived experience who are representing the voice and needs of clients of our organisation to the board and management.

Vision Australia is also a significant employer of people who are blind or have low vision, with 15% of total staff having vision impairment. Vision Australia also has a Memorandum of Understanding with, and provides funds to, Blind Citizens Australia, to strengthen the voice of the blind community.